

Brian McLaren:

I was in my 40s, it was a stressful time in my life, and I was jogging around a lake. The way I would distract myself from my angry lungs and tired legs when I was running was to listen to motivational speakers on an ancient technology called a cassette tape on an even more ancient technology called a Walkman. I was running around this lake, feeling a lot of stress, and one of these motivational speakers quoted Abraham Lincoln. He said, "I desire to conduct the affairs of this administration so that if, at the end when I come to lay down the reigns of power, I have lost every other friend on Earth, I shall at least have one friend left. That friend shall be down inside me."

What happened next, I couldn't have anticipated. A sob, the only way I can say it, a sob erupted from deep down inside me. I stopped running, I stooped over, had my hands on my knees. I suddenly felt a series of messages coming from deep inside me. Some part of me that I wasn't listening to decided this was the chance for me to start and listen. The voice said something like this. "Others make mistakes and you tell them don't think twice. But if I make a mistake, I beat myself up 100 times. If one my staff members looks tired, I tell them take the day off. But I tell myself if I'm tired, work harder for two or three more weeks and then take a day off maybe." What I felt was happening is some voice deep inside me was saying, "I'm not going to survive if I keep treating myself like this."

What would it mean for us to learn to have a gracious friend inside us? Something other than a critic, a cruel taskmaster. Recently, our guest today, Reverend Nadia Bolz Weber, posted a prayer on her Substack. It goes like this. "May God guide us to know when to work, when to fight, when to rest, when to feast, and when to just go ahead and order Crumbl cookies. That was us last night," she said. Fresh, hot cookies, sometimes that's the gift to ourselves that we need. A treat, an indulgence, an act of grace, rather than a cruel taskmaster demanding more.

Learning to see ourselves through the eyes of love, this is something many of us need right now just to survive. You might say that at the core of the gospel is a beautiful invitation to extend grace to everyone, including ourselves.

Welcome, everyone. We're so glad you're with us for another episode of Learning How to See. We have a dear friend of over 20 years of mine, Nadia Bolz Weber, with us. So happy, Nadia, that you've agreed to spend some time with us. I wonder how you would like to introduce yourself? Probably a whole lot of people know you already, but many probably don't.

Nadia Bolz Webe...:

It's funny because I'm on this Red State revival tour right now and I talk about how I don't like being introduced when I'm at events. It's my least favorite thing. It's just embarrassing and it feels so awkward for someone to dryly rattle off my accomplishments, because I never feel like I really rise to them. It just feels like a disappointment when they list all that, and then it's me that people are left with. I just start singing. On this tour, I just starting singing instead and get people to sing with me. But, anyway.

Let's see. I really just work as a public theologian and a volunteer chaplain at a women's prison. Yeah. I mostly just do writing, and speaking, and preaching for a living. Yeah.

Brian McLaren: You and I share something, we both started local congregations. You led a congregation for how many years?

Nadia Bolz Webe...: I was there for 11 years. I left about seven-and-a-half years ago. They closed a couple weeks ago, Brian. I don't know if you saw that.

Brian McLaren: I didn't know that. Wow.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: Yeah.

Brian McLaren: Well, things have a lifecycle.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: They do, yeah.

Brian McLaren: We'll have to catch up on that story another time. You publicly identify as a Lutheran.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: I know. It's weird, isn't it? It's so radical.

Brian McLaren: That's right. For a lot of people, probably have no idea what a Lutheran is, apart from I think the vice president accused them of money laundering recently, but anyway.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: I now have a T-shirt that says "Lutheran Crime Boss," or something like that. Somebody sent me, yeah.

Brian McLaren: Oh my goodness. But the way that you are Lutheran taps into one of Luther's revolutionary ideas, which is just this idea of grace. That this word grace is pretty much the key to everything. You probably know this, Father Richard Rohr, this was the term radical grace was so much at the core of what he was about.

I wondered if you could just riff a little bit about what it means to be a person who's oriented toward the world around that idea of grace?

Nadia Bolz Webe...: Yeah. I think for me, it has to do with a type of humility that I don't come by naturally, but that is the healthiest place for me to stand. Meaning, so much of the good things in my life I somehow get to have and I definitely didn't earn them.

My sister was texting me the other day and she's like, "I'm just watching the sunrise." I go, "It's amazing that thing comes up every day and we don't have to do a thing." It's not like my virtue pulled it up from the east. Yet, I still get the

warmth of it, I get all the goodness from that, and yet I didn't do anything to earn it. I just get to have it.

I think I've started to define grace as the freight train that delivers into my life all of the most beautiful and unearnable things. Second chances, and getting to hold a baby, and puppies. Eating a perfect peach in summer. You can't earn it. I think it's this orientation towards life that leads very naturally to gratitude, but not gratitude as a virtue. Gratitude as a result of looking at life and going, "Here's what I have, and then here's the role grace played in it." Then if you draw a line under that, the result is that's how much gratitude you'll feel.

I've never felt grateful for something I earned. Never. Not really.

Brian McLaren: Yes, yes, yes.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: I think the enemy of gratitude isn't ingratitude, it's entitlement I think is the logical conclusion of that thought.

Brian McLaren: How much I deserve, yes, yes. This is important because this podcast, Learning How to See, it's about how we see the world. Richard Rohr often talks about how contemplation is meeting all the reality or seeing all the reality that we can bear, and just learning how to see. It seems to me, when I think about you and your story, you are a person for whom grace has entered you and done a lot of work. Obviously, we're never done, and it affects the way you see. I think that's what draws people to your books. They just have a vantage point of this radical grace.

I wonder if there's a story in your life where you felt someone saw you with eyes of grace, or with what we might call divine love or gracious love.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: People know I'm not terribly anonymous about the fact that I'm in Alcoholics Anonymous.

Brian McLaren: Yeah.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: That I've been sober in a 12-step program for 33 years and still go every week, it's still part of my life. You have to do this thing where you write a searching and fearless moral inventory of yourself. It's awful, I don't know why anybody would do it if they weren't desperate.

The first time I wrote a fourth step. The next step, the fifth step, is to say it out loud in the presence of God and one closed-mouth friend, one other person. This was in 1992. It was during the AIDS crisis. I was living briefly in New York City at this point. I was so filled with shame about what was on those pieces of paper that I didn't do a fifth step until I found somebody who was dying from AIDS. I knew she wouldn't be alive in two months, honest to God. The only way

that I would do it, I would say those things to another person, was if I knew they weren't going to be alive in a couple months.

I will never forget this woman's countenance as I rattled off all of my sins, and misdemeanors, and betrayals. She had an oxygen tube and she was quite thin, and we were in her little apartment. Her countenance was one of such compassion. No judgement at all. She didn't flinch at all. There was something about her openness towards the worst part of my story that she received it without judgement that changed, shifted something in me. Honest to God, I added some things I hadn't written down. Because to me, it's like what is the response of someone when they know the worst things about you? Not the best things. Who cares about the best things? It's the worst.

She just looked at me and she goes, "Kid, okay. Now, all that's in the past and it's over. You have to move on from it." She didn't see me as a sum total of my worst moments. She saw me as I would say a child of God. I will never forget what that felt like.

We live in this time where people, maybe it's passing a little bit, the call-out culture, maybe it's not as much right now hopefully. But we want to accuse people and get them to basically repent and say they were wrong, but then none of their apologies are enough. People are like, "That's not good enough!" My friend Dave Zall says that "the internet's just like real life, but with all the forgiveness vacuumed out of it."

But I've seen how compassion actually can transform people. If what we're looking for is the transformation of the human being ... If you think of Les Miserables, what transformed Jean Valjean? Was it the accusations of Javert? Was it him pointing, "You're wrong, you're a sinner?" No, no, no, no, no. It was the priest. It was this compassion. It was this, "You forgot the best. Have this, too." That's what melted him into another person. I think that's what comes to mind, yeah.

Carmen Acevedo ...: That's beautiful. It reminds me, you've written that Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The gospel is frankly hard for pious people to understand." Because the gospel confronts us by saying that we're all sinners, and then you end by saying, "Now, come as a sinner you are to the God who loves you madly." Madly, like that woman in the bed.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: Yes! Because if you can take the whole of it, if you can take the good and the bad of who we are and be loved, that's very different than polishing ourselves up so that we're as lovable as possible and then receiving love.

Carmen Acevedo ...: Beautiful.

Brian McLaren: As you shared that story, Nadia, I couldn't help but think then you went on to become a pastor, and you would stand in front of a group of people leading

them in a confession of sin. Not as some morbid thing, but in a way, as a way of stepping off the treadmill of proving how righteous we are.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: Yeah, it's just a relief.

Brian McLaren: Yeah, yeah.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: I think in more progressive Christian spaces, I find it a little disappointing that people conflate talking about sin or our shortcomings to low self-esteem. Because look, my self-esteem is intact. This is not an issue. And I can readily admit some pretty horrible things about myself as a way of looking at the whole and how good the good ... If you can't admit why the bad news is bad, it's hard to then accept why the good news is good.

This is the drum I just keep beating. But it bears out, like in the women's prison, for sure it does. That I've learned so much from being in there about what it means to be beloved, and how powerful this kind of language is for people who don't have the luxury of thinking they've got it all together.

Brian McLaren: Yeah, yeah, yeah. In one of your memorable quotes recently from your Substack, you said, "Self-righteousness may feel good for a minute, but as I like to say, only in the way that peeing your pants feels warm for a minute. After that, it's cold and starts to smell." That's certainly memorable.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: Classic.

Carmen Acevedo ...: Very. You've also said, "This is why sometimes I like to say the gospel is like the worst good news I've ever heard."

Nadia Bolz Webe...: Yeah. No, it definitely is. That whole pray for those who persecute you, and lose your life to find it, and the first shall be last. There's some stuff in there I wouldn't choose. I call it fairly bad branding for a messiah.

Also, he talked about forgiveness of sins all the time, which is what got him ... This is what infuriated people, you understand? This is the thing that they really ... They're like, "Look, man, we have systems. We have civic and religious systems set up to make sure people get what they deserve." This son of God fellow comes in and he starts saying everyone's sins are forgiven and they're like, "We can't have a thing like that. It's not fair. We don't want people to think you're just letting people off the hook."

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: He's like, "Well, I actually insist on a thing exactly like that. It's offensive."

Think how upset people got about forgiveness of student loan debt. Furious at the idea of mercy. It's not fair.

Brian McLaren: In fact, as you say that, I can't help but think of Episcopal Bishop Mariann Budde who, in a sermon to a lot of our top government officials, just simply asked them to remember to be merciful. She was called nasty, and boring, and a lot of other ... And political. This is revolutionary news, yeah.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: It continues to be offensive.

Brian McLaren: But it also continues to be transformative. When we experience that mercy, it changes us. We're going to take a little break. After that break, let's come back and talk about that.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: Yeah.

Brian McLaren: Learning How to See will be back in a moment.

Carmen Acevedo: You're now invited into a brief five-minute practice where we're going to meditate on love in a very personal, and also very contemplative way that takes in all people, all creatures, and remembers how much God loves us. Feel free at any time to pause the practice so that you can spend as much time as you want at any given point as your heart leads you, and just let it lead you.

It's such a joy to pause together, inspired by Nadia Bolz Weber and her beautiful stories of embracing our imperfect, beloved lives sustained by ever-flowing divine grace. And with inspiration from James Finley. Look together through the eyes of love, and meditate on and with a very common trinity of words, I love you. As contemplatives do, go deeper with these. Wherever you are, let your attention fall now on your breath. Taking slower, deeper breathes than you've taken all day so far. Slowly breathing in deeply through your nose, and slowly letting it out through your mouth.

Keep breathing like that, feeling your lungs expanding and contracting. As you look, as if for the first time, at these three simple words, let yourself re-see them. Asking, what does I love you mean to you? How many other ways do you say I love you in a day with words? I appreciate you. I see you. I hear you. I got you. I'm proud of you. In the movie The Princess Bride, one of the ways is, "As you wish," as Wesley eventually tells Buttercup. Over 1000 years old, these three English words hold and radiate centuries of beautiful, imperfect, authentic lovers experiences in so many languages. In English, sage, compassionate ancestors first said I love you, [foreign language 00:20:24]. Feel the centuries of love in these, [foreign language 00:20:29]. I love you. I love y'all.

Coming back to the breath, mindful now of wise, kind ancestors with us, for we're never alone when we meditate. Together with each other here, on the in breath, hear God, love, or however you name divinity saying, "I love you," to you. And on the out breath, say back, with all your childlike heart, "I love you," to God or love. Breathing in the beauty of God's I love you, and breathing out your heartfelt I love you back.

Whatever comes up while doing this breath prayer, joy, sorrow, fear, grief, anger, gratitude, shame, feel it. Hold it gently. Remembering, as Jim says, "Love and love alone has the authority to name who we are," and let the feeling go. Breathing in the beauty of God's I love you, that loves us through, and through, and through. Breathing out your heartfelt I love you back.

Why do we love each other? The best love tastes of without a why. Meister Eckhart called it [foreign language 00:23:05], without a why. Living that presence a rose possesses, simply being without a why. Eyes open to ever-flowing divine grace. We can pause and do this meditation anywhere, any time, to remind us only love has the authority to name who we are. May you be blessed. We love you.

Nadia, you have this wonderful sermon, as we pivot to seeing through the eyes of love, others. Sometimes, or often, when it's difficult and often because we're imperfect, that adds to the difficulties. You've written a homily in A Stranger and You Welcomed Me. "All Jesus asks is that this love given so indiscriminately does not fall on fallow ground, but reproduces itself again and again in the love you have for both the neighbor and the enemy. An imperfect love made wholly by God who loves us madly. It is enough. Amen." That's how you end that.

Today, when we're all struggling at different times of the day, but every day, with the new realities that are taking shape, or maybe from a past time. Either way, you have so many good stories. Could you share with us a time that you saw through the eyes of love, maybe when you had difficulty doing so, or something else that comes to mind?

Nadia Bolz Webe...:

When you guys asked if I'd bring a story, I had one ready, and now I'm thinking of something totally different. Which is that, right after the election and right before Thanksgiving, there was a lot of stuff online about, "If you have family members that voted for Trump, don't go home for Thanksgiving." Or, "If you do, confront your uncle. If you really care about X, then you will say Y."

There's a lot of these weird formulas that we're constantly taking in. That are given to us by people who, by the way, don't know us or our lives. Somehow, we allow them to factor into our self-regard. Which, if I had a campaign, it would be we could all stop that now.

My sister-in-law Elizabeth, who I've known for 25 years, we joke a lot about how we're opposites, very different. She is still in the Church of Christ, all of her kids went to little, private conservative Christian schools. My kids were in the city. It was just everything's different. She runs a Christian adoption agency, so we could not be more different. And the love and affection that she and I have had towards each other over 25 years has grown and deepened, especially in the shared grief of our nephew being killed. We love each other so much.

And still, there was a moment right before the election when we were helping my elderly parents, she said something about voting for Trump. On the way home, I had to fight all of this stuff about, "How dare she? She knows my kid's queer." Just the litany, the litany of things that, because of things I've taken in from the internet, now this is affecting my regard for somebody. Then I just snapped out of it and I was like, "Any ideology that demands loyalty to it at the expense of love is not one that I can be a part of."

I am being asked by these people who don't know me online to assume things about Elizabeth based on what they're telling me and what I've read on the internet, and not based in the authority of the love that we shared for 25 years. I thought, "I'm out, man. I'm out. I can't do it." If that's what's being asked of me, I don't know that I want to be a part of that. I don't find it helpful, because to me, the love that we have has an authority to it. That voices, ideologically-laden voices online who don't know me does not have the same authority.

Carmen Acevedo: That really speaks to me. It makes me think I need to call a family member, you know what I'm saying?

Nadia Bolz Webe...: Totally.

Carmen Acevedo: Who we don't see eye-to-eye, but ...

Nadia Bolz Webe...: Man, if we lose that, we've lost too much. I'm sorry, we've lost too much. There's a lot we're losing we don't have control over right now. There's not much we can do. But man, to say, "Well, I'm so upset about that, that I'm going to lose this, too." No, man. I'm not willing. I'm out. Yeah.

Brian McLaren: Nadia, as you say that, I'm thinking I've been researching authoritarianism for a long time. There's a bunch of research on left-wing authoritarianism and right-wing. Right-wing authoritarianism is more common and more durable because right-wing authoritarians usually gain power by creating or exaggerating an enemy to unite everyone against.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: Yes. Yes, of course.

Brian McLaren: Someone to be afraid of, and so on.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: Of course.

Brian McLaren: Left-wing authoritarians, they usually gain power by making promises of benefits that they will deliver. Very often, left-wing authoritarians get into power and then can deliver on the promises they made. What do they do? Then they have to find an enemy to blame for their failures. In that way, it turns the left-right line into a circle, because then the left-wing authoritarian-

Nadia Bolz Webe...: They meet in the back.

Carmen Acevedo ...: Yeah.

Brian McLaren: Exactly right, yeah.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: They meet in the back. Yeah, they always do. Yeah.

Brian McLaren: Yeah, that's right. As you said, it just makes me think, on a very personal level, we can say, "Those people are so hateful. I hate them for being so hateful." Then suddenly, we've closed the circle.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: The thing I just keep going back to is I want my view of myself and other people in the world to be slightly more informed by my life than by what I read on the internet. This is my whole goal. I wish we could shake the Etch-a-Sketch in this country and start over, because we're being manipulated and it's so financially prosperous to a small group of people. That kind of manipulation, understanding how our dopamine works, and how we keep scrolling, and then we're buying. Anyway, all of that.

I want to go to the right-wing folks and say, "Get off the internet for two weeks and live your life, and then report back. Was it the hell scape dystopia that the campaign convinced you it was? Are immigrants eating your pets?" Probably not. Probably not. Then I want to go to the left-wing and go, "Same for you, guys. Just get off the internet, live your life, report back. Was it just hate, where you just encountered so much hate?" Probably not. Everyone needs to just snap out of it and figure out whose my neighbor? How do I show up for them? What's going on in our community? Stuff that feels like AI, and deepfake videos, and fake news isn't going to inform because it's just in our real life.

Carmen Acevedo ...: Yes. I want to say too, that two points of your teaching that reoccur throughout, are that we don't have to be perfect and we can't be perfect. And that Jesus is with us and loves through us. You say that, "Jesus knows our love is imperfect." Because I was raised with perfectionism in the Southern Baptist Church. You write-

Nadia Bolz Webe...: How'd that work for you, pretty good?

Carmen Acevedo ...: Yeah, it broke me.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: Exactly.

Carmen Acevedo ...: "Jesus knows our love is imperfect, and self-centered, and riddled with expectations, and low blood sugar, and regrets," you say. And that, "Jesus is always with us as we make our attempts." That has meant so much to me over the years. I can't even begin to say. I'm glad you keep saying that in every new situation we find ourselves in. In the country and as individuals.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: Yeah. Ah, thank you. Yeah. I always want people to understand that I'm only ever preaching to myself and letting other people overhear it. I'm not the kind of teacher who ... I have so much forgiveness, and love, and patience. I have such an abundance that I have so much extra to share with others who need it. It's that I am desperate for more. I just am desperate for more. I just persist in trying to say what it is that I need to be reminded of.

I think the one thing, in talking about love specifically, is that it's not something I've focused on in my work very much, if I'm honest. There's a couple sermons out there, but love isn't actually much of a recurring theme. There was a point when I was serving House for All Sinners and Saints that I was baffled by how well they loved each other, at how well they showed up for each other. They really loved each other well. I'm convinced it was because we never focused on love. I'm convinced that it's because we really focused on grace for ourselves and others.

Because when grace is at the center, there's nothing to prove or accuse other people of. Whereas, sometimes love can be this thing that we have to do perfectly again. It can be an accusation. "Well, that didn't feel very loving of them. I didn't feel very loving towards this person." It can be a basis on which we're judging ourselves and other people. Some things only happen as a result of focusing on other things. As Westerners, we want to go straight at stuff and go, "How do we do the X?"

I think that one of the reasons House for All Sinners and Saints was a community that loved each other well is because if people showed up and we said, "What we want you to know about this church is we love each other well," never would have happened. I'm convinced of it.

Brian McLaren: Yes, yes.

Nadia Bolz Webe...: Never would have happened. Yeah.

Carmen Acevedo ...: Thank you, Nadia. That's beautiful.

Thank you for your beautiful presence here and for listening. What a blessing Nadia's teaching joy in teacher are. I was really moved by her reminder and her stories of how we do well to live our lives offline, and not let online opinions and interactions there dominate our days, which is so easy to do. At least, for me.

Here's a gentle activity you're invited to do as "homework" to take this conversation further into your soul and every day. Find a piece of paper, a journal, a pen or a pencil. Sit near a window if you want or can. Light a candle or some incense, if you have some. Maybe make a cup of tea. Get comfortable. Take some deep breaths. That might be the most important part of it. Then write down, with no thought to grammar whatsoever, a brief response if you

feel comfortable doing so, to this question. Who is someone in my life, family or friend, I've been close to in the past, but that political or other differences have made me feel estranged from?

Remember, and write down if you want, or at least think about an instance or a story where you shared love together with this person. Just reflect on it. Then ask God, "Help me see them through the eyes of love, the eyes of grace, and the eyes of [foreign language 00:36:18]," Eckhart's without a why of eternal love. Then sit with what you feel, and give it, and this person, and your relationship to God, and may God you and this soul

We're going to close with a meditation. A reading of Inimitable Excerpts from Nadia Bolz Weber's homily in the collection *A Stranger and You Welcomed Me*. It also has helpful contributions from Gregory Boyle, Richard Rohr, Megan McKenna, Brian McLaren, Penny Nash, and others. It's a juicy collection.

This is from Nadia's sermon. "Which commandment is the greatest, they asked Jesus. He answered, 'Love God, love your neighbor.' At first, that seemed cool, but then they tried it for a while and came back to Jesus saying, 'Could you just say go to church, be nice, and don't have sex before marriage instead?' See, the trap in what Jesus says in Mark 12 is that loving God and neighbor only seems easier than fulfilling the law until you actually give it a try. Making a fumbling attempt at loving someone with halitosis, or who never pays me back, or who just ate the banana I was saving for breakfast."

"I like to imagine that Jesus had that mischievous glint in his eye when he said the deceptively simple thing that all the law is summed up in love God and love the neighbor as yourself. We've been brainwashed by endless hours of Hollywood and 1000 bad Hallmark cards to think that love means having feelings of warm affection towards someone we like or are attracted to. But human love is profoundly imperfect and almost always unreliable. All the rom-coms in the world can't change the fact that human love is complicated, and that the issue of love is complicated for us because we so often are loved poorly, loved incompletely, loved conditionally. "The subject of human love is a tricky one because we ourselves so often love poorly, incompletely, and conditionally."

"And forgive the pop psychology, but my theory is that when we are loved poorly, we begin on some level to assume that we are maybe undeserving of being loved well. It can be hard to see a way forward, to see a way for loving the neighbor to mean anything but trying hard and falling short. But the trying is so important. The thing to remember here is that Jesus knows who he's dealing with, he knows our love is conditional, even when we tell ourselves it's not. In his gracious response, he has chosen to fill our love with His. Watch how this command to love turns, like all things that Christ touches, and bears a promise. He does not give a command without a promise attached. The promise that comes is this. It is not all dependent upon us, there is nothing that is. All He asks is that this love, given so indiscriminately, does not fall on fallow ground, but

reproduces itself again and again in the love you have for both the neighbor and the enemy, an imperfect love made wholly by a God who loves us madly. It is enough. Amen."

Brian McLaren:

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